



**On the Road to Rejoicing
First MC, December 27, 2020**

Luke 2:22-40
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During Advent, we have been on a journey, a road through Readiness, Repentance, Restoration and Revelation. This journey leads us now to Rejoicing with two elderly saints, Anna and Simeon.

As we near the end of another year, we rekindle our interest in the past and in the future. We may not have mastered the sci-fi technology to travel between the past and future, but we'd sure like to know more about both, and about their connection. We also want to open ourselves to whatever new God has in store for us in 2021.

This morning's readings from Luke tell us about two wise and devout saints who "looked forward to the consolation of Israel," "the redemption of Jerusalem," God's new. They had reason to rejoice. These early biblical prophecy students were, however, very different from those making church and secular headlines throughout the ages.

Some of you may recall how in the spring of 2011, a group of Harold Camping's Family Radio believers descended on Saskatoon to support the message posted on billboards throughout Saskatoon and many other cities. The Rapture was to take place May 21, 2011 and the end of the world on October 21

of that year.

Camping's various failed prophecies were but six among many failed attempts throughout the centuries. Wikipedia has an incomplete listing of those predictions, some of them richly Scripture laced, though misleading, several pages worth,ⁱ and they forgot to include Claas Epp. If you are into Google, you can look them up later in Wikipedia. There are some rather noteworthy names there, Popes, Evangelists, Reformers like Martin Luther, less orthodox figures like Jehovah's Witnesses' Charles T. Russell and radio preacher Herbert W. Armstrong. Whether fundamentalist, evangelical or heretic, they share in trying to use Scripture to predict the future and even set dates.

All this, in spite of Jesus' warning in Matthew 24:36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

As Deuteronomy 18:22 reminds us, "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed."

Looking forward to the consolation

This morning, we want to learn from these two seasoned saints, Simeon and Anna, some better ways to study the Scriptures, better ways to anticipate God's future and rejoice on this road to redemption. Today's Scripture text honours these two persons who **seem** to share this interest in biblical prophecy. Luke mentions that the devout and Spirit led Simeon was "looking forward to the consolation of Israel." Near the end of this passage, Luke praises Anna who recognized this child, and spoke about him to a special group of people described as "all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." At first glance, then, it might seem that Luke is promoting this kind of futuristic prophetic focus. Simeon, Anna and the people who welcome the baby Jesus are those "looking forward to" this "consolation," this "redemption."

We do not have to read much further into Luke before we begin meeting others who knew their Bibles as well. The devil quotes Scripture in order to tempt Jesus. The Pharisees quote Sabbath laws as they pounce on the disciples. Jesus pointed to the elaborate tombs of the prophets. One generation killed them, the next quoted them, built these elaborate memorials and then kept right on killing God's new prophets. What is the difference between those death dealing Bible quoting false teachers and devils, and these good people like Simeon and Anna who "look forward to God's consolation and redemption"?

As we ponder these two types of Bible readers, I am reminded of an image used by ancient monks. Hedgehogs are little animals covered with harmless



spines. The ancient monks believed that hedgehogs gathered grapes by rolling in them. Whatever skins stuck to their quills, they kept. The monks told each other not to be like the hedgehogs as they read the Scripture or reflected on their lives. Instead, they urged one another to be like the farmer who gathers clusters of grapes and squeezes them to catch the sweet juice.

Bible Using and Abusing

In a sense that's an important message in Luke's gospel. The difference between the followers and the killers of Jesus is not simply quoting the Scriptures. It's the difference between the grape gatherer and the hedgehog.

A prosecuting attorney once tried to impress a jury by quoting from the Good Book. "We have it on highest authority, the Good Book itself, that 'All that a man has he will give for his skin.'" The defense lawyer responded, "I am much impressed by the fact that my distinguished colleague here regards as the highest authority the one who said that. If you will check Job 2:4, you will read that the authority speaking this is none other than old Satan himself." Sometimes it might be good to check the context a bit more closely.

During my University days, a small group of us enrolled in a New Testament Greek course at one of the church colleges. One of our fellow students was a zealous Christadelphian, a group with views of Jesus similar to Jehovah's Witnesses. He wanted Ed and I, fellow Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship members, to join him for a Bible Study. In a moment of inspiration, we agreed to do so, on one condition. Like the early church, we would have access to just one gospel and we chose the gospel used for our Greek course, John. I recall his frustration when he could no longer do his elaborate Christadelphian cross referencing proof-texting to prove his anti-Trinitarian views about Jesus.

Hedgehog Bible readers are those who roll around in the scripture but come away with only those skins which happen to stick. If you want the juice, said these monks, you'll have to press them in clusters. There'll be some juice there in those opening scenes of Job and in the Gospel of John, but you'll find it only by grabbing hold of the larger context, the larger story.

That's the major difference between Hedgehog Bible Readers and Cluster

Gatherers, between self serving cherry pickers and those open to the Spirit's "new wine". The prickly priest types have mastered the hedgehog approach, gathering religious scalps like grape skins. For them, much of Scripture is about damnation for others. The Simeon and Anna types open themselves to the new wine of the spirit. Under the Spirit's guidance, they read those Scriptures as God's continuing story of incredible love toward all people. Those Scriptures properly read are a story of "consolation" and "redemption."

In Praise of, and by, Simeon and Anna

Our text this morning clearly demonstrates the importance of Scripture for these elderly saints and these new parents. Circumcision, the special rites for the first born, doves as an offering for purification - these were all parts of the law. In the temple there were also pious pilgrims like Simeon and Anna. Simeon and Anna stand for all who "look forward to" God's "consolation" and "redemption." They welcome Jesus and raise their voices in praise and proclamation.

Why the difference? How do Simeon and Anna keep themselves open to God's new ways, whereas these Scripturally literate religious leaders remain closed and oppose them?

First, Simeon and Anna each have a profound devotional life. Simeon is described as a "righteous and devout" man of unreported lineage. The aged Anna is described as a "prophet" from one of the lesser tribes, a widow present in the temple whenever the doors opened, worshipping "with fasting and prayer night and day." An ordinary man and an elderly prophetess nurture their faith in the traditional centre of Judaism, the temple.

Second, both remain open to the Spirit's direction and guidance. There is a sense of divine happenstance in Anna's arrival at that very moment. Luke mentions the Spirit's assuring Simeon that he would see the Lord's Messiah before he died, and then leading him to the very place. Simeon and Anna are devout, open to the Spirit.

Luke suggests yet a third way in which they open themselves to God's new ways. Note the words "consolation" and "redemption" to describe God's intentions for the future. Certain of their contemporaries reveled in much more bloody and fiery language to describe their enemies' demise. In those days, as in ours, there were plenty of Hal Lindsey types eager to describe in lurid detail the fate of others, those wicked from "the late great planet earth!" But Simeon and Anna didn't waste their time calculating when and how who will do what to whom. They knew things were rough, but they yearned for, they trusted, they looked forward to, God's "consolation" and "redemption."

"Consolation" and "redemption" are very positive, and very biblical, words.

"Comfort, comfort ye my people," the prophet said in Isaiah 40:1. "The Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem," we read in Isaiah 52:9. "Consolation" and "redemption" speak of God's intentions. Simeon speaks about having seen God's "salvation... prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel." (vss.30-32) Simeon quotes phrases from Isaiah chapters 42, 49 and 52. "All peoples," even "the Gentiles," will be included in God's new works of salvation. Where the zealous priests and scribes busily gathered biblical proof texts to justify keeping those boundary walls high, keeping sinners and Gentiles outside, Simeon opened himself to Isaiah's vision. Under the guidance of the Spirit, these words of promise for Israel and for those other peoples found their way into this inspired song of thanksgiving for this child.

Keeping Ourselves Open

Somehow it seems to me I have met Simeon and Anna here in Saskatoon, people who echo their Spirit led openness to God's work of consolation and redemption. That, for me, has been inspiring and energizing. What more can we learn from Simeon and Anna? How can we keep ourselves open to recognize the new ways God is working in our age, in this church?

First, we do need God's help to move beyond our preferences or even prejudices and to read the Scriptures aright. Important as it is to know and quote the Scriptures, that is not enough. Chief priests, scribes, Pharisees and Satan and their ilk did not stop quoting Scripture 2000 years ago. I suspect that most of us have well honed abilities to search the Scriptures to find those parts we need to support our prejudices, priorities, purposes or politics. You and I instinctively know how to be good hedgehogs; we need God's help to determine to move beyond that.

Second, we remember God's passion for consolation and redemption, no matter what happens. Things often go from bad to worse. Simeon is able to talk about "the falling and rising of many in Israel," about "the sword (that) will pierce your own soul too." Anna has experienced much grief in her life, being widowed after only seven years of marriage. But even that bad can be seen in the light of God's "consolation."

As we read the Scriptures, may we major on the majors not the minors. May we open ourselves to God's divine love story, and find ourselves within that story. And the result will be praise, praise for what God has done and will do, around us, among us and within us. As they did for Simeon may those words from Scripture shape and enrich our praise!

As we review this past year and dream about the next, as we reread the Scriptures, as we look at the world around us, as we look toward God's future for

this church, as we open ourselves to God's new work among us, may we join Simeon and Anna in "looking forward to the consolation." May we see in all of life, in all of Scripture, in our pasts and in our futures, the God who seeks always our "redemption."

May we never be satisfied with the skins our prickly natures tend to accumulate. May we search with Simeon and Anna for that consoling redeeming refreshment, the "new wine of the spirit." May we then join Simeon in praising God. rejoicing and saying

(Our) eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.

ⁱ "List of dates predicted for apocalyptic events,"

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_dates_predicted_for_apocalyptic_events